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SUBJECT: BRAZIL GRAPPLES WITH RACISM AND RACIAL QUOTAS

REF: A. SAO PAULO 00895

[1](#)B. SAO PAULO 01002

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Poloffs recently met with University of Brasilia (UnB) President Timothy Mulholland, an expert on Brazil's university quota systems to discuss self-imposed quotas and the proposed Racial Equality Statue. Racism in Brazil is a difficult topic to address largely as a result of a stricter definition of what constitutes racism than that in the U.S. Many Brazilians continue to deny that racism exists in Brazil, even in the face of clear statistical evidence, and the idea of using race-based quotas to address racial inequality is controversial. While many universities and some private sector companies have implemented internal race-based quotas, the Brazilian Congress has yet to enact any legislation pertaining to this into law. End Summary.

Racism As Defined in Brazil

[1](#)2. (SBU) According to University of Brazil (UnB) President Timothy Mulholland, there are several issues based on a Brazilian's perspective that makes racism discussions problematic. Mulholland, an American/Brazilian dual national, experienced America's Civil Rights Movement while attending school in California in the 1960s, and spent considerable time in Brazil's Northeast, the region with the highest concentration of Afro-Brazilians. He told Poloffs that the reason so many Brazilians have difficulties understanding what racism means and challenge its existence in Brazil stems from the widely accepted narrow definition of the term. In Brazil, racism is an overt crime with implied violence, legally defined as a crime for which there is no bond or bail. Mulholland pointed out that by this definition, "racism" usually occurs in reference to anti-Semitism, and almost never in reference to negative actions against Afro-Brazilians; in reality, anti-Semitism is a much smaller problem than racism in Brazil (reftel B). He said that it is also important to note the strong Marxist orientation of social science studies in the Brazilian educational system, according to which discrimination is defined as exclusively class-based, not race-based, which makes the concept difficult for Brazilians to fathom. According to Senator Paulo Paim, Brazil's only self-identified black senator, it is these factors, combined with the fact that only six percent of Brazilians self-identify as black (50 percent of Brazilians would be considered black by U.S. norms), that account for Brazil being "50 years behind the U.S." in terms of civil rights awareness and actions (septel).

13. (SBU) Mulholland said that Brazil's racism is usually not overt. Interracial marriages, friendships, and professional associations between the races are common in Brazil. Instead, he said, some white Brazilians demonstrate racism by complaining that non-white Brazilians "don't know their place" when they insist on equal benefits and status. Against the claims that discrimination is really socio-economic, he pointed out that it is not a matter of social status: "blacks in Brazil are the poorest of the poor, the poorest of the middle class, and the poorest of the rich." Studies show that blacks consistently have less education, less pay, and fewer opportunities in Brazil. He further asserted that the situation has not measurably improved in the last 50 years, citing a study showing that the gap in those areas between white and non-white Brazilians has not narrowed. While both groups have benefited from the economic growth in the last few years and the overall standard of living has improved for all Brazilians, non-whites still lag behind considerably. According to Mulholland the situation is extremely grave in the favelas where racism exists to the extent of "virtual genocide" in Brazil's largest cities, where armed drug trafficking is the only option for many residents.

Self-implemented Quotas in Universities

14. (SBU) The application of quotas originated in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia states, and then began to gain momentum in other states with large black populations. In an extremely controversial move in 2004, UnB was the first federal university to adopt racial quotas, currently set at 20 percent for Afro-Brazilians. Mulholland says that if he were

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to try to seek approval again from his current board of regents, it might fail, but he believes firmly that it is time for quotas. Quotas or any other affirmative action program, in his view, are an intervention aimed at overcoming failed or ineffective public policies to make things right, and that neither legislation nor moral conviction are bringing into being. In his 31 years at UnB, he has seen class after class of graduates that could have been graduating classes in apartheid South Africa because there were no "people of color" among them. This is true across Brazil, even though it has a larger black population than any other country except for Nigeria. He said that the faculty situation is even worse, only five to six of his over 2,000 faculty members are black.

15. (SBU) Today, according to the Palmares Cultural Foundation, a division of the Ministry of Culture that promotes ethnic integration and culture, there are over 40 universities that have quota systems of some form or another. Mulholland said that 17 of 46 federal universities, considered the best institutions of higher learning in Brazil, have now adopted quota systems. Notably absent from this list is the University of Sao Paulo (USP), the most prestigious school in Brazil, located in the country's wealthiest state. According to Mulholland, USP steadfastly refuses to implement a quota system. He noted that there is also inconsistency with the quota numbers used among the universities, but believes that the increase in quotas is a positive sign. He also mentioned that UnB has a unique relationship with the National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI), which admits 10-20 indigenous persons per year in specialties chosen by their communities. FUNAI provides housing and stipends and UnB provides special assistance such as tutoring and additional educational counseling to guarantee full participation. He said that the only the University in Alagoas State actually has a quota for women (60 percent).

Quota Controversy

¶6. (SBU) Mulholland said that critics of the quota system are extremely vocal. Many claim that it creates a conscious divide between the races, including elements of Brazil's black rights movement (reftel A). However, none of the ill effects, divisions, or open conflict between groups predicted by some highly vocal critics of quotas and affirmative action have come to pass. In fact, he said, students are quite accepting of diversity and so is most of the faculty; there is no exclusion. He said that in his conversations with groups supporting Brazil's black rights, he has pointed out that they are not advancing their cause by disagreeing about quotas. Other critics say that Brazil's problem is not a racial issue, but a socio-economic issue. However, Mulholland disagrees with this wholeheartedly, noting that studies in which race and gender are variables and other potential factors are held constant, blacks consistently earn less money than white male colleagues with the same backgrounds. "No one is black because they are poor;" he said. Conversely, "money doesn't eliminate discrimination."

Quotas & Legislation

¶7. (SBU) Mulholland pointed out that race issues are politically sensitive, and speculated that even the Special Secretariat on Racial Issues (SEPPIR), a Cabinet-level agency

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created by President Lula, has been stifled by the administration in order to avoid putting the president in the spotlight on a controversial issue. A bill creating Brazil's first Racial Equality Statute has passed the Senate, traditionally the more conservative branch of the two houses of Congress, largely due to Lula's efforts. But the bill, introduced in 2005, has moved very slowly, and is now in a special committee in the Chamber of Deputies that was created by Chamber President Arlindo Chinaglia on November 9, 2007. Legislation in the Brazilian Congress is usually only considered in the plenary after general agreement by the Chamber President and party leaders, but there is still no such agreement on a racial equality bill and no one can predict when the legislation might reach the plenary. According to Paim, should it be passed, the law will already be outdated, as some large companies have already implemented racial quotas and others are considering instituting them to deal with glaring inequalities within the work force. This

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is one of the many positive results of private sector corporate responsibility initiatives.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Racism exists in Brazil, and Brazilians are increasingly trying to address it. A growing number of Brazilians worry that, if the inequalities are not addressed, there may come a time when the deferred dreams of Brazil's black and indigenous populations clash explosively with the rising expectations of all Brazilians, spawned by a growing economy and a rising standard of living. This effort to combat racism is hindered by the widely held view that racism is violence against a particular group, rather than the treatment of one human being as inferior to another. Although the Racial Equality Statute working its way through Congress is an important step that comes at a pivotal time, with Brazilians still divided on the issue, the legislation may never reach the Chamber Plenary for passage into law without additional pressure. Both a possible visit by members of the U.S. Black Caucus and the proposal of a U.S./Brazil Joint Action Plan in support of racial equality are USG actions that could provide timely reinforcement to national efforts and spur further Brazilian action on this issue. End comment.

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